UNITED NATIONS **A**

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/AC.96/SR.544
6 October 2000

Original: ENGLISH

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fifty-first session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 544th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 2 October 2000, at 5 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. KHORRAM (Islamic Republic of Iran)

CONTENTS

ANNUAL THEME: UNHCR@50: FROM RESPONSE TO SOLUTIONS (continued)

This record is subject to correction.

Corrections should be submitted in one of the working languages. They should be set forth in a memorandum and also incorporated in a copy of the record. They should be sent within one week of the date of this document to the Official Records Editing Section, room E.4108, Palais des Nations, Geneva.

Any corrections to the records of the meetings of the Executive Committee will be consolidated in a single corrigendum, to be issued shortly after the end of the session.

GE.00-03119 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 5.15 p.m.

ANNUAL THEME: UNHCR@50: FROM RESPONSE TO SOLUTIONS (agenda item 4) (continued) (A/AC.96/938)

1. Ms. TAFT (United States of America) paid tribute to the four UNHCR staff members who had recently been killed in West Timor and Guinea. Their sacrifice embodied the commitment of all UNHCR staff who risked their lives every day around the world. It was an outrage that humanitarian workers had become the target of armed elements and mechanisms were urgently needed to protect those on the front lines. It was gratifying to know that the Secretary-General was committed to leadership on the security issue.

2. She commended Mrs. Ogata on her commitment and performance during the 1990s, a challenging period for UNHCR and one when the world had looked to it to respond to the needs of refugees and other conflict victims.

3. Durable solutions were not easy to find and States must redouble their efforts to support UNHCR, its partners and affected Governments, both politically and financially. The 1990s had been a decade of repatriation, during which some 13.5 million people had voluntarily returned home. It must not be forgotten, however, that local integration and resettlement were also durable solutions.

4. It was becoming increasingly difficult for UNHCR to mobilize either human or financial resources to meet the challenges. A central objective over the coming year must be to develop a more effective collective approach to resource management, prioritization and mobilization, as well as strategies to ensure adequate funding. The United States was considering making a larger contribution early in 2001 and encouraged others to do likewise.

5. Mrs. Ogata's successor would need to address four key issues. First, UNHCR must prioritize its mandate responsibilities for protection and solutions and decide what support programmes were essential. Agreement should be reached with other organizations to ensure that all other needs were met and that acceptable standards of protection and care were provided.

6. Secondly, there needed to be a global recommitment to the international protection regime. Thirdly, UNHCR's emergency response mechanisms and protocols needed strengthening and surge capacity was required in order to respond to new emergencies and ensure adequate protection in the field.

7. Lastly, urgent attention needed to be given to the security of both refugees and humanitarian workers.

8. Mr. PETIT (France), speaking on behalf of the European Union and Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey, paid tribute to the High Commissioner and her staff, who had suffered greatly in recent weeks.

9. On the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary, it was worth remembering that UNHCR had initially been created for three years to deal with European situations. It was now a permanent actor on the international stage, with operations throughout the world. As its task had grown, however, so security conditions for both refugees and humanitarian workers had deteriorated. UNHCR's work increasingly took it into the thick of conflicts. The European Union condemned all attacks on humanitarian workers and welcomed the fact that they were defined as war crimes in the Statute of the International Criminal Court.

10. As crises became not only more frequent, but also more complex, UNHCR action had at times provoked criticism. The European Union commended UNHCR's willingness to analyse its action and learn from experience, as it had done, for example, after Kosovo.

11. UNHCR had also been active in defending the fundamental principles of asylum and in promoting the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol and other relevant international instruments, as well as providing support to States in implementing those instruments. The European Union called on all States that had not yet done so to accede to the 1951 Convention.

12. Although voluntary repatriation remained the best option for refugees, all too often UNHCR was unable to implement such programmes because of States' failure to settle conflicts. The European Union commended the generosity of those countries that took in large numbers of refugees and was concerned that some situations were not more rapidly resolved.

13. In a changing international context, it was important to find new approaches and the European Union welcomed UNHCR's efforts to develop partnerships, particularly through the PARinAC and Brookings processes. Cooperation with armed forces was a rather special area, and it was appropriate that the report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (the Brahimi report), addressed the question of integrating conflict-prevention and peace-building strategies, in which humanitarian aspects were of great importance.

14. Regional strategies such as the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe were important because they placed the humanitarian issue in a regional context, thereby engaging all the actors and not just UNHCR. Welcome progress had been made in south-eastern Europe and more members of minority groups were returning to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia.

15. There were also concerns in the area of asylum: at times of mass influx, it was difficult to distinguish migrants from those seeking asylum in good faith; and trafficking was on the rise. The European Union attached great importance to the adoption of a convention against transnational organized crime and an additional protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children. It was continuing its work on the harmonization of its members' asylum policies and welcomed the dialogue it had established with UNHCR in that regard.

16. Mr. IBRAHIMI (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that, despite UNHCR's noble contribution in the past 50 years to improving the plight of refugees, it still bore a heavy burden of responsibility and the flow of refugees and asylum-seekers continued to rise.

17. The protection of refugees' rights hinged on the political will and commitment of the international community to strive for fair solutions free from political considerations.

18. International cooperation and burden-sharing had to be promoted in order to meet the challenge. Certain host countries bore a disproportionately large share of the refugee burden, yet lacked the resources to deal with their own national needs. Voluntary repatriation projects also lacked resources, and that hampered preparations for repatriation.

19. In the name of justice, logic and humanity, it was essential to take a fresh look at the problems of durable solutions and international responses to the refugee crisis and at the question of international burden-sharing in order to ensure an objective and purely humanitarian approach. UNHCR, as the body responsible for providing international protection and finding durable solutions, should take the lead in that process.

20. Iran was a major contributor to UNHCR, but, as host to millions of refugees for more than 20 years, it had faced enormous economic, social and security problems and the entire international assistance it received did not cover even one of the four basic needs of refugees for one week. UNHCR and other members of the international community should increase their assistance for refugees in Iran in order to mitigate the adverse economic impact of hosting refugees and provide the necessary resources for voluntary repatriation projects.

21. Iran believed that voluntary repatriation was the best and most durable solution and, while it was ready to cooperate fully with such projects, it called on the international community to engage in development projects in refugees' countries of origin in order to help overcome obstacles to voluntary repatriation, such as economic problems and instability.

22. Mr. TAKASU (Japan) said that his country deplored the recent killings and kidnapping of UNHCR personnel. Such incidents must never be tolerated. Humanitarian work would never be without risk, but those risks must be minimized. Japan supported efforts to reassess the security benchmarks for suspending operations and evacuating from imminent danger and would back the implementation of additional measures to strengthen the security of field personnel. It would contribute a further US$ 1 million for security training, as it had done the previous year.

23. The primary responsibility for the safety of humanitarian workers and for bringing those who harmed them to justice lay with the Government of the host State. Japan urged all States that were not yet parties to the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel to accede to it without delay. The Executive Committee should also appeal to the United Nations General Assembly to adopt a protocol covering all humanitarian personnel and, pending the adoption of such a protocol, to declare the provisions of the Convention applicable to humanitarian operations in exceptionally dangerous situations.

24. Japan valued the efforts UNHCR was making as part of its core activity of strengthening asylum; it welcomed the proposed "three circles" consultations, in which it would participate actively. UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response capacity must be strengthened and a well-balanced partnership with non-State entities such as NGOs and the private sector must be built. A welcome development was the recent establishment in Tokyo of

the UNHCR Regional Centre for Emergency Training, with funds provided by Japan and with a view to enhancing the capacity of NGO and government personnel in Asia and the Pacific region to deal with emergencies.

25. Humanitarian and development agencies should also focus on post-conflict and long-term needs - an aspect acutely felt, particularly in many parts of Africa. Japan appreciated the High Commissioner's initiative of focusing on the institutional and funding gap between relief and development and would strengthen its post-conflict assistance and the support already being extended to Sierra Leone, Kosovo and East Timor. It would continue to support relevant measures through the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, as well as bilateral and other assistance schemes.

26. Humanitarian assistance must be backed by a focus on broader political and economic perspectives as part of the international community's duty not only to seek the early resolution of conflicts, but to prevent their recurrence and engage in peace-building. At the Millennium Summit, the Japanese Prime Minister had emphasized the need to promote human security by building a society in which its most vulnerable members' rights were protected and people of differing ethnic origins, religions and races could live together in peace. Japan would redouble its efforts to that end; it had made support for refugees and internally displaced persons one of the most important pillars of its international cooperation and would maintain its strong support for UNHCR's global operations.

27. Mrs. Ogata had endowed the Office of the High Commissioner with great moral authority, modernized its management and cooperation and made tremendous contributions during a decade of unprecedented difficulty and increasing complexity when refugee problems had increased dramatically. On behalf of Japan's Government and people, he expressed deep appreciation for her significant achievements and immeasurable contribution to the security of untold millions.

28. Mr. GOMIS (Côte d'Ivoire) said that his Government appreciated the valuable work Mrs. Ogata had done during her term of office; he congratulated her and all her staff for the efforts they were making despite so many risks in the field. He was particularly mindful of those who had lost their lives in service and expressed his sympathy for those who had been subjected to kidnapping, including a compatriot, Laurence Sapeu Djeya, who had fortunately been recently rescued; on behalf of his Government, he sincerely thanked UNHCR and all those who had helped to secure her release. His country supported any action taken to protect UNHCR personnel and enable them to carry out their mission in safety.

29. The current annual theme, "UNHCR@50: from response to solutions", provided an opportunity to appraise activities relating to asylum and refugee protection and assistance, with a focus not only on repatriation, but also on cooperation between UNHCR and his country and on international solidarity. Côte d'Ivoire had ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, as well as the 1969 OAU Convention, and was considering the possibility of acceding to the Conventions on the Status of Stateless Persons and the Reduction of Statelessness. His Government was also studying draft legislation on refugee protection. In addition to formal instruments, however, his country had a tradition of accepting refugees in a spirit of brotherhood. Since 1990, it had taken in 400,000 Liberian and 1,900 Sierra Leonean

refugees, in addition to around 1,000 refugees brought from the Great Lakes and elsewhere. Its exceptional policy of integrating refugees with the inhabitants instead of in camps had gained it an OAU award at the summit meeting of Heads of State and Government in Algiers in June 1999.

30. The ecological, economic and social burden of hosting refugees should not be borne by developing countries alone. In that respect, he urgently appealed to UNHCR to continue to play its catalytic role in giving effect to the principle of solidarity. The need for burden sharing was particularly acute with regard to the rehabilitation and integration of Liberian refugees in his country.

31. The spread of conflicts and trouble spots throughout the world made the refugee problem increasingly complex and heightened the need to enhance peacemaking and peacekeeping. A stabilization treaty for West Africa seemed to offer a solution, as would UNHCR's partnership with OAU, IOM and non-governmental organizations. He urgently appealed to the international community to provide technical and financial assistance to enable his country to carry out gender-specific projects, rehabilitate reception areas and provide education for children.

32. Mr. AKRAM (Pakistan) expressed Pakistan's heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families of UNHCR staff members who had recently lost their lives in West Timor and Guinea. His country paid tribute to those who had sacrificed their lives for noble humanitarian missions; it condemned violence against the personnel of UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies and assured the High Commissioner of its fullest cooperation for strengthening the security of UNHCR field staff within its jurisdiction. It also expressed the deepest admiration for the dedicated and heroic leadership of the outgoing High Commissioner during a decade that was supposed to have brought global peace, but instead had witnessed bloody conflicts that had killed and displaced millions, although Mrs. Ogata and her collaborators had helped to save hundreds of thousands of lives and to ease suffering throughout such crises.

33. Despite its initial three-year mandate, UNHCR had sadly become a permanent feature of the international security system, and the ever-growing gap between the challenges it faced and the resources at its disposal was a matter of concern. The greatest lack was in political will, especially on the part of those with the most means. Financial generosity should be accompanied by a long-term focus; responses evoked by the media could be sporadic and thus inadequate and even discriminatory.

34. For over 22 years, Pakistan had hosted refugees from the war in Afghanistan - the world's largest refugee population - and its steadfast application of international asylum standards had caused considerable economic and ecological problems which it continued to bear, international humanitarian assistance having been drastically curtailed since the end of the cold war. Those problems had been exacerbated by the drift of refugees from camps to urban centres in search of work and by the effects of the region's worst-ever drought. It was therefore time for UNHCR to adopt a new budget format in order to allocate special separate refugee budgets, prepared in close consultation with host countries and the donor community, for developing countries with large, almost permanent refugee populations.

35. Pakistan's hosting of Afghan refugees had been widely recognized as exemplary, but Pakistan did not view their integration, advocated in certain quarters, as a viable solution. It endorsed the High Commissioner's emphasis, during a recent visit to the region, on the need for improving dialogue with the Afghan authorities, strengthening presence and activities, allocating more donor resources and responding to the drought problem. Failure to address such urgent matters might lead to further humanitarian crises in the near future.

36. Mr. SANTOS SIMÃO (Mozambique) said that Mozambicans, having long experience of being refugees during the national liberation struggle and the more recent war of destabilization, were witnesses to UNHCR's success. Mozambique had hosted refugees from the outset of its independence and had acceded to all relevant international conventions. In its capacity as a host country and as a result of its close working relations with UNHCR, it could affirm that the work carried out achieved positive results despite the difficulties and continuing challenges. It wholeheartedly saluted the High Commissioner's outstanding leadership and dedication and the efforts of all UNHCR workers, particularly those in the field, who risked life and comfort for the sake of their mission. Mozambique also condemned those who had kidnapped and killed humanitarian workers in West Timor and Guinea and hoped that they would soon be brought to justice.

37. UNHCR officials in the field came into contact not only with ordinary refugees, but with many other people, including parties to conflicts, who could give them a unique insight into situations and even indicate possible solutions. In status and practice, however, UNHCR was a humanitarian agency not publicly perceived as a political organization. It was important for it to maintain that status, but the insights it acquired should not be lost; UNHCR should be able to assist in seeking negotiated solutions to conflicts without losing its impartial image.

38. Mozambique commended the Secretary-General for commissioning the Brahimi report, which was aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of United Nations peacekeeping operations. African nations were deeply concerned, indeed frustrated, by the lack of progress in peacekeeping operations on that continent. The pattern always seemed the same: OAU and regional organizations such as the South African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) managed to achieve agreement between the parties to a conflict for a negotiated settlement of disputes, but subsequent delays in providing assistance for peacekeeping operations created opportunities for violations of agreements and even a resumption of conflicts, producing further refugees. The contrast with the prompt deployment of well-equipped military personnel to deal with situations in Europe suggested a double standard, which the Brahimi report offered a good opportunity to address.

39. Refugees required not only shelter and basic assistance, but the prospect of a better future, particularly for children. Of particular concern was the lack of educational opportunities for many refugee children, exacerbated by recent immigration limits in some countries, with the resulting restriction of access to higher education. All countries, rich and poor, should share the refugee burden in a spirit of international solidarity.

40. On the subject of security for field workers, he drew attention to the suggestions he had made during the panel discussion on "promoting and building peace: linking refugee and humanitarian assistance with longer-term development" which had been held prior to the current meeting.

41. The outgoing High Commissioner's courageous and dedicated leadership would not be easy to replace. The fact that, during the past 10 years, virtually every peace agreement signed had allotted a specific task to UNHCR testified to its prestige and the trust placed in it. On behalf of his country's people and Government, he congratulated Mrs. Ogata and wished her well.

The meeting rose at 6.10 p.m.